

University of Groningen

Ivorybill Hunters. The search for proof in a flooded wilderness

Piersma, Theunis; Hill, Geoffrey E.

Published in:
Ardea

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2007

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Piersma, T., & Hill, G. E. (Ed.) (2007). Ivorybill Hunters. The search for proof in a flooded wilderness. *Ardea*, 95, 322-323.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

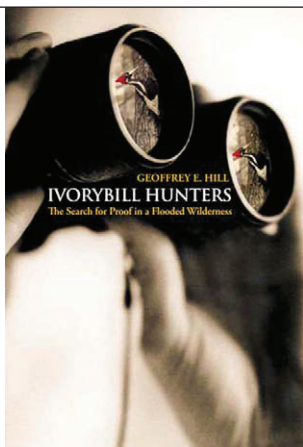
The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Geoffrey E. Hill. 2007. *Ivorybill Hunters*. The search for proof in a flooded wilderness. Oxford University Press, Oxford. ISBN 978-0-19-532346-7. Price hardback Euro 22



Geoff Hill certainly knows how to tell a captivating story! One weekend, two years ago, I was drawn into his book summarising a large body of research on causes and consequences of variations in plumage coloration in House Finches *Carpodacus mexicanus*. Once I had started reading, I didn't stop before the final pages of *A red bird in a brown bag* were finished. At the time, Hill surprised me with his nice mix of personal narrative and eloquent biological explanation.

Now he has surprised me again, a surprise on more than one account. First of all, who could have anticipated a Hill-book on a large and supposedly extinct woodpecker? Not even Geoff Hill himself. Secondly, the book tells about a year of secret searching for an unlikely and small, but seemingly healthy population of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers *Campephilus principalis* surviving in an area of cypress swamps in the Florida Panhandle! After I finished the book, again read in one breath from cover to cover, I was convinced that 'ivorybills' indeed are not extinct.

This book describes the trials and tribulations during a 12-month period in 2005 and 2006 of a small team of ornithologists that found ivorybills "on their second morning searching in a place no

expert had ever mentioned as a good place to look." Hill headed the team, and as one who's "never been one to pass on a chance to tell a tale", he wrote down the events as he saw them unfold.

The first canoe trip through the flooded cypress forests along the Choctawhatchee River, Florida, was triggered by the announcement in April 2005 by a team from the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell University (including the Dutch woodpecker specialist Martjan Lammertink) of a spectacular rediscovery of ivorybills along the Cache River in the state of Arkansas. Soon the evidence for that discovery, published prestigiously in *Science*, came under heavy attack from USA's top birders and one or two ivorybill specialists, and the intense, large-scale and partly automated search for ivorybills in Arkansas and neighbouring states, following the initial discovery, ran dry. What greater pleasure than sharing the experiences of a small, underfunded team working undercover in an unlikely place that actually amasses many sightings and a respectable amount of sound-based evidence for a thriving population of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers (but also fails to properly register the secretive birds on either photo or video, at least within the first year of searching covered in this book)?

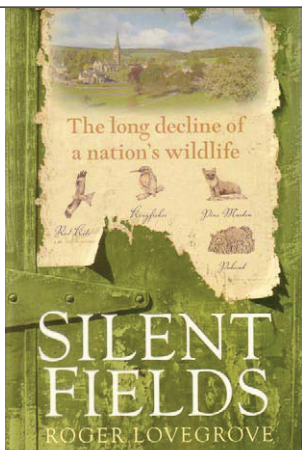
The extant Ivory-billed Woodpeckers may well owe their survival to their skills of avoiding detection by humans! Their demise in no small part was caused by the almost complete cutting down of the 'endless' and 'impenetrable' cypress swamps of the southern American states. In Hill's own words: "This orgy of consumption ran unabated from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, and it left scarcely an acre of virgin cypress on the entire continent. Greed know no bounds, and the complete consumption of the vast cypress forests in less than a century stands as one of the greatest feats of resource gluttony in American history." Adding insult to injury ("Begin Orgy of Consumption Act II"), the early twentieth-century ornithologists saw no problem in collecting all known remaining ivorybills for museum collections. Whereas these ornithologists had no problems in documenting the breeding behaviours of

these 'last' ivorybills (before collecting them by shotgun!), the woodpeckers that are still around, more than 60 years later, have an uncanny capacity to avoid dedicated and very experienced human observers. It is quite possible that this trait kept them going all this time!

The book presents a great, truly 'American' story of discovery and the nuts and bolts of birding and science. It gives an intimate resume of the complexities of working on endangered (well, supposedly extinct) enigmatic large birds standing in the centre of public attention. For the latest on the sites and the search visit website www.auburn.edu/ivorybill.

Theunis Piersma, University of Groningen and Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research (NIOZ), The Netherlands

Lovegrove R. 2007. *Silent fields. The long decline of a nation's wildlife*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. ISBN 978-0-19-852071-9. Hardback, xii + 404 pp. Euro 41



With a title like 'Silent fields' the mind jumps to pesticides and related environmental disasters as depicted in 'Silent spring', Rachel Carson's wake-up call from the 1960s. Not so. This book describes an entirely different warfare against 'vermin', the

one honed into perfection by generations of game-keepers, farmers, foresters and villagers in general, i.e. the eradication of birds and mammals supposedly detrimental to the interest of man. Although focused on England, Wales and Scotland for the past 450 years, similar stories could be amassed for no matter which country no matter where (provided a written record is available). Maarten Bijleveld's *Birds of prey in Europe*, published in 1974, bears witness to that effect. Even today, in our 'science-based' western world, exactly the same prejudices against predators are held in quite a few circles, even if the step from prejudice to action is now slightly hampered by wildlife laws in favour of wildlife, rather than against wildlife as it used to be. The data collated by the author is staggering, with a variety of primary sources like parish records and estate records. Clearly, checking all archives available was impossible, and instead 1429 English parishes were selected from which data were obtained (out of a total of 10 819), with another 146 from Wales (out of 1018). How representative this selection is, is difficult to tell. Puzzling facts remain, such as huge region-based differences in persecution, lack of vermin records in some parishes where they might have been expected (nearby parishes did control vermin), or why apparently just a single species like House Sparrow was targeted in some parishes. Similarly, the extent and range of killing, including vermin, was carefully recorded by most of the larger estates in England and Wales after the implementation of the Parliamentary Enclosure Act (between 1750 and 1870), when newly enclosed lands were developed into sporting estates. Very few of these vermin records can now be traced. The opposite is true for Scotland, with good information available after the establishment of game estates.

Many more questions arose along the way of this quest, but the overall picture of large-scale destruction – year after year – is glaringly obvious. The larger part of the book is a species-by-species account of exactly what this destruction signified, from Hedgehogs to House Sparrows, from rats to Red Kites. A humbling experience for several reasons, as for example the apparently much larger